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ABSTRACT

A member of the faculty of Concordia College (Moorhead, Minnesota) recounts his experience with developing local internship opportunities for German business students in exchange for internship opportunities in Germany for his international business students. The faculty member had to develop a list of potential companies, in an area of small to medium sized firms; contact them to encourage their cooperation with the program; locate housing for the interns; provide information to the interns before they arrived, concerning money, clothing, transportation, and other facts; meet the interns at the airport and assist them in getting settled; introduce them to their employers; and regularly follow up on their progress. Implementation of the program has been time consuming, but it is felt that there are many willing partner schools in Germany and that exchange internships are an excellent method of developing positive relationships between Germans and Americans. (JDD)

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PAPERS ON INTERNATIONALIZING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Exchange Internships with Germany: How it can be done

Willard Hiebert

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Exchange Internships with Germany: How it can be done

Willard Hiebert

When Concordia College designed its International Business Program more than ten years ago, it was decided that internships would play a significant role in the developement of our students. Since our program is a cooperative program between the foreign language departments and the Department of Economics and Business Administration, we decided to concentrate on internships in foreign countries. I started writing letters to firms in Germany,and I also made a trip to Germany to meet with the various companies, which I had contacted. I was successful in lining up several internships at four different companies. Things went smoothly for several years, but two years ago the companies all came upon hard times and, one by one, they wrote to say that they could nolonger cooperate with me. This was extremely bad news, as I had program that required internships to complete and no internships to offer. What to do?

Shortly thereafter a letter arrived from Germany. An acquaintance of mine, who had formerly been a local businessman, was now teaching at a "Fachhochschule" in Germany and needed my help. While he was in the United States, I had invited this man to talk to my German for business class at Concordia, and he had gladly accepted, as he welcomed the chance to speak his native language again if only for a brief period of time. I explained our program to him after his presentation, and he was very supportive. Now, several years later, he was writing to me and making the following proposal. He offered to find internships for my students if I would find internships for his students. The students at his institution are also strongly encouraged to complete an internship in a foreign country, and the USA is the first choice of many of them. However, as a German student later told me, it is extremely difficult

for them to get accepted by the American firms which they contact directly. Some write up to a hundred letters and receive nothing but rejections.

I did not immediately jump at this offer. I realized that it would involve considerable amounts of time (which it eventually did), and I doubted that I could find any company in my area that would be willing to take an intern from Germany. While we are the largest metropolitan area for hundreds of miles, I was not very aware of the kinds and types of businesses in the towns of Fargo, ND, and Moorhead, MN. We always say that Fargo isn't the end of the world, but you can see it from here. Most people don't know where it is, an most non-midwesterners doubt that it really exists. It does. And since I needed internships in Germany, I had little choice but to find out more about the business community of my own town.

Fargo-Moorhead has no large firm which dominates our area, but rather a moderate number of small to medium-sized firms in both the manufacturing and service sectors. I questioned my counterpart in Germany as to whether he would consider work in such firms appropriate for his students. He answered with an unqualified "yes" as he felt that students received more varied experiences in smaller firms than in large companies. I said I would make an attempt to help him, and he immediately sent me a stack of about ten resumés to start with. I wrote back to him and said that it would be a miracle if I could place three of them, and that I would consider one placement a success. That was fine with him.

My first task was to locate appropriate firms. Here I learned that one must leave no stone unturned and be very flexible in one's thinking. I wrote to the state chamber of commerce and asked for firms involved in exporting.

them that they are helping American students get internships in Germany by taking German students into their firms here in the USA. It is a win-win situation. Even for companies that don't export, the foreign national can provide a new perspective on the organization of their firm which can lead to greater efficiencies and thus to greater profitability. This letter is carefully worded so that the main body of the text can be left in the word processor to be used over and over. I also include a testimonial letter from my car dealer which underlines the benefits of the program as he experienced them. His experience with the very first German intern had been far more successful than either of us had dared hope. I would like to add that, especially when writing to smaller companies, it is better to call the company and obtain the name of the chief executive officer and address the letter to him or her. You are more successful when the boss directs a subordinate to check something out, than when a subordinate approaches the boss, especially when proposing something so radically new as working with a foreign intern.

I waited a few days before contacting the companies. Most of the time I called for an appointment, but sometimes I just walked in the door. If it is difficult to get the individual on the phone (i.e. he's busy now and will call you later) the later approach works better as some people find it more difficult to brush you off in person than on the phone. Once you get face to face with the company representatives, you have to know exactly what you want. You must re-iterate what you said in the letter and be able to answer their questions about what they can expect from the intern and about what they are expected to provide for the intern. I generally point out that beyond signing a form for use by the American consulate in Germany, there is very l .tle

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Since we are located close to Canada, the list was longer than I expected. At Concordia, our business administration section employs an "Executive in Residence" who is a businessman from the local community. He was able to further expand my list. I then contacted a friend of mine in our money-raising office (officially known as developement), and he gave me some more leads.

That first year I placed one student at, of all places, a car dealership. This student was a trained mechanic before he started his business education. this additional training made him appear more valuable to the car dealer. The fact that I had bought three used cars from the dealer during the past year helped somewhat. I believe it also helped that the dealer was under thirty years of age and willing to experiment. At any rate, I had my first placement, and my counterpart placed all three of Concordia's students in Germany. He requested that the students from Concordia send him a "Lebenslauf" with picture together with a letter in German describing the type of internship they were seeking. He asked me to provide him with a college catalog so that he could explain Concordia to prospective internship providers.

The second year I adopted some more successful tactics. At the suggestion of my wife and son, I wrote introductory letters to all of the firms on my list that had more than fifty employees. This appears to be the critical mass below which a company cannot afford to take on an intern. (You should receive a copy of the introductory letter as a handout). In this letter which I intend to use again, I try to point out to the firm how their cooperation with my program will benefit them as much as it will benefit the German and American students. I believe that it is extremely important to point out to

extra paper work for them to do. The students come with a "J" visa which excuses the employer from withholding taxes and social security, although the student must obtain a social security number upon arrival. I suggest an hourly wage of five dollars an hour, which is adequate to live on in our area since no taxes or social security are withheld. The student provides his/her own health insurance. I will take the responsibility for finding housing unless the company wishes to do so. Other questions can come up, and the more you know about the preparation of the German students, the more likely you are to convince companies to risk taking one on. They must agree to accept the student atleast eight weeks prior to the starting date of the internship so that the German student has adequate time to complete the paper work in Germany. The same is true for an American student if she/he wishes to obtain an "Arbeitserlaubnis" prior to his/her departure for Germany. However, Americans can get work permits after they arrive in Germany, but some German firms don't know this, and it is better to settle such things before the student departs.

One of the major problems in such an exchange program concerns housing. My counterpart in Germany and I have agreed to locate housing for each other's students. We feel this is best beacuse it is extremely difficult to find housing in a foreign country right after you arrive, and it is especially risky for students coming from America due to the tight housing situation in most German cities. I always advise my students not leave before housing arrangements are finalized. Since our students remain enrolled in our respective institutions, housing in student dormitories is not an option at my institution. In order to find apartments, one can comb the want ads, which is very time consuming. I have found it advantageous to contact rental agencies

which manage large numbers of apartments. It is sometimes difficult to find furnished apartments, but since I have a wife who loves to decorate rooms, we have on occassion contributed furniture from our attic to the cause. You will have to come up with a solution that works for you. Other potential problems include deposits for dammage and utilities. I usually pay them and am reembursed by the student when he/she arrives. One problem that never occurred to me resulted from trains. German trains do not have whistles, and this sound is extremely annoying to some German students. Therefore, it is best not to rent apartments too close to railroad tracks.

Most of these students have not spent much -- if any -- time in the United States, so a letter of advice before they leave Germany is in order. In this letter, the students should be warned not to bring too much cash but rather to bring money in the form of travelers' checks in American dollars. I'll never forget the first German to arrive as he opened his "Mappe" and took out a thousand dollars in American cash and two thousand German marks. It took him ten business days to exchange the marks for dollars. You should also compare the climate in your town with the climate in Germany and give appropriate advice on the type of clothing to bring. I encourage the students to write to their future employer in order to determine what is appropriate to wear while working for that company. They should be warned that German electrical appliances won't work in America. If they have a driver's license, they should bring it with them because they might have to, or want to, purchase a car due to the general lack of public transportation and the great distances one encounters in America. All correspondence with the German students is in German.

When the students arrive, I speak only English with them unless it becomes necessary to explain some detail to them in German. My wife and I

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generally meet them at the airport and have them spend their first night with us. The next day we take them to their apartments, open bank accounts for them, arrange to have their phones connected, and get their social security numbers. We tour the town to give them an idea of where to find things, and we introduce them to their employers. We give them our phone number in case of an emergency, but we don't see them very often after that, other than to have a meal about once a month in a restaurant.

To put the beginning near the end, I must say that I was fortunate in having this exchange opportunity offered to me. I did not have to go out and find a "Fachhochschule" that was willing to be my partner. However, I believe that there are many willing partners waiting to be discovered in Germany, as Germans tend to think far more internationally than Americans do. To locate such schools, contact your nearest German consulate or the German Information Service in New York. Explain your intent and keep searching until your persistance pays off. But before you start, make sure your own students are up to such internships. Do they possess adequate business and linguistic skills? Quality control is of utmost importance, as good students promote a program, but poor students kill it.

As you can see, such an exchange can be very time consuming, and it is seldom rewarded with a promotion or a raise in pay, but the emotional rewards are great. I get great satisfaction out of seeing Germans adapt to the USA: out of hearing them tell about their successes at their jobs and in their social relationships. Employers write me letters thanking me for getting them involved in this program, and I enjoy seeing how the American employees take the Germans under their wings and form international friendships. From now on these Americans will know that not all Germans are skinheads. I also enjoy hearing from my American students how they have encountered similar

hospitality in Germany. Positive relationships between Germans and Americans on both sides of the Atlantic can only further our profession and our business interests. And an exchange of internships is an excellent method of developing these relationships.